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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Kevin Savetz

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->From the Editor's Keyboard              "Saying it like it is!"
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Believe it or not, the sun really does exist - I actually witnessed it in
all of its glory! The "Floods of 2006" have finally ended here in New
England. Many of our rivers crested, but all of the dams held up...this
time. I think that we got a foot of rain in my town alone, and that mark
didn't even make the Top 10 rainfall totals! Fortunately, our house
remained dry throughout the deluge. Some of my neighbors and friends in
surrounding towns were not as fortunate. Basements, cellars, garages, and
cars were flooded, causing excessive damage. It's so nice to see the sun
shine again. And, with the resurgence of sunshine, I managed to get in an
enjoyable round of golf down on Cape Cod. Hopefully, this weather pattern
stick around for awhile - I could really get to enjoy this!

Anyhow...following up on some comments the past two weeks regarding a New
York City employee who was chastised, and then eventually fired for surfing
the web during work, I came across a new related article this week. There
is obviously some interest in this topic. A survey was recently conducted,
probably as a result of this story. The study took a random sampling of
employees at large companies to get their views on surfing the web during
work (and break) times. Not surprising to learn that most employees are in
favor of employees surfing the web during work times. What did surprise me,
however, was the amount of time that this study determined was the average
employee spent online a week - over three hours! Personally, that seems a
bit excessive. I mean, I know that I occasionally surfed the web during
work hours for unrelated work things, but never that much time! I hope that
someone does a more in-depth study on this topic; I think it would really be
interesting. What are your views? Drop me a line - perhaps we'll do our
own study at A-ONE!

Until next time...

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                           Lua for TOS

kRadD has announced:

At the ATARIADA last week I released Lua 5.0.2. It's a port of the
famous scripting language including interpreter and compiler binary. The

source is also available. The port was done using Pure C.

Lua will be the basis for my NonConForm Rapid Game Development library
for the Falcon. It worth to google around to see what other projects did
using lua, to get a feeling what the language is good for.

URL: http://twh.homelinux.org/zope/kradd/releases/lua/

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
   """""""""""""""""""""""""

                         Nordic Atari Show

Hi all,

In case anyone has missed the information about NAS2006 (Nordic Atari
Show), the date has been set to June 30 - July 2. Yes, this year NAS
will span 3 days, something that should make it more appealing to ppl
that has to travel long distances to get there.

Like the last few years, NAS will be held at Samskolan in Gothenburg.
We are told that we can expect more details on NAS from the official
website soon, but unless something is radically different from the
event last year visitors should be able to access the computer room all
around the clock. Last year, those who did not want to waste their
precious money on a hotel room could grab their sleeping bag for a nap
in the sleeping room.

* To monitor the official website for official news regarding NAS2006:

http://www.sak.nu/nas/index.htm

 * To see which ppl that are planning on going to NAS, and to view
pictures from previous NAS events:

http://nas.atari.org

Hope to see a lot of you ppl at NAS2006 :)

Regards,

/Joakim

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone, and things just keep getting weirder and weirder... in many, many areas.

First of all, the weather here in the northeast is strange. As you may have heard, we had mucho rain for mucho days. Luckily, my area has escaped the flooding that's been a problem to my north... so far.

It's also been cooler than normal. Hell, we had warmer days than this in January! Now, I'm not talking about sub-zero temperatures, but close enough to make you shiver in the middle of May.

The other thing that I see getting stranger is the political world. I'm not going to bore you with my opinions and beliefs... If you've read this column more than a couple of times, you already know what those are... but no matter who you are, you've got to admit that things are getting strange. It's like the whole country is on "double secret probation" or something.

Aside from the wild world of weather and the wild, wild world of politics, my wife and I are in the process of buying a house. The volume of paperwork is amazing. Hell, if I had access to the proper processing equipment, I'll bet I could BUILD a house out of all the paper!

Well, that's about all I've got to say for now. Let's get to the UseNet stuff. I know how much you enjoy it and wait with baited breath all week for it. <grin>

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Joakim posts this:

"While MagiC and N.AES allows programmers to specify which char (by setting WHITBAK flag, plus position of the underscore in bits 8-14 in OBJ_STATE) in a button text that should host an underscore, does anyone know if the AES is also responsible for handling the actual keyboard short cut?

*That is, should FORM_KEYBD() detect that a particular key combo, for example ALT+D, is defined and report back to the app that the corresponding button was pressed? (From what I can tell, MagiC will for example report that the key even was not used/eaten by FORM_KEYBD whereas XaAES will, and then report back that an EXIT button was pressed)

*Or is the AES in this case just displaying an underscore on a button text character, and nothing else...? (Which would seem like a rather crippled implementation, so I hope this is not the case)"

'GFA MIDI Charles' replies:

"You can probably do program loops around me , but I may be able to
help..... as far as i know the aes ,tos and vdi reference guides all
have opcodes in the rear near the index and syntax for routine
mentioned ,,,gintin ,gintout,peek global+2 etc etc ..
check them , is that what you desire.?????"

Last week, Dave asked about my favorite backup program, Diamondback:

"Does Diamond Back 3 support image backup to ZIP drives? I have 2.51
which only supports floppies."

Edward Baiz tells Dave:

"I have DB3 and it works with floppies, hard disks and SCSI tape
drives. I am not sure about ZIP drives. It may if the computer
views the disks as a hard disk. Jaz drive backup may be possible,
but I never tried it out."

Also last week, Patrice Mandin told Edward Baiz this about playing
WMV files:

"Didier Mequignon ported the Unix mplayer program a while ago, so
maybe it could play some WMV files. However most codecs required
are win32/x86 only, and on Linux/x86 for example, mplayer uses wine
as a library to load win32 codecs."

Martin Byttebier tells Patrice:

"M_player supports all kind of formats (mov, avi, mpg, flm, fli, flc,
flh, gif, dl, bat, cdh, cdl, cdv, seq, dlt) but no wmv. [Is] wine a
library?"

Didier MØquignon jumps in and tells everyone:

"No, the Mplayer from the unix world.

http://perso.wanadoo.fr/didierm/files/MPlayer-1.0pre4-atari.lzh
Works fine with the DVD support in Extendos.

Sure it's slow, it's just a compilation. I have never tried crosoft
files."

'Phantomm' asks about graphics on Atari:

"I know a lot of Atari ST-Falcon users have moved to other
platforms for Graphics work.

Was wondering if anyone reading this group still uses any of
the Atari Graphics/Animation packages that were released?

I personally have tried to collect most all of them, and there was

some really nice software created. Especially if you had a good
Graphics card and or a Falcon.

Music related software was big on the Ataris for awhile.
I'm sure there are still people like me who still uses their
Ataris for Music related stuff.

But I really never heard a lot about the Graphics/Animation
area. Anyone still using their Ataris for Graphics stuff??

If so, what Software are you using and for what uses?"

Edward Baiz tells Phantomm:

"I have a Nova Graphics card on my Hades. I use Calamus SL 2006 a lot
but mainly for person use. I print out my Christmas labels every
year. I not only print out the addresses, but also a little
Christmas graphic scene. I use a Christmas card(s) that I received
the previous year. I scan them and put them into Calamus before
printing. I also use it for making up label for my video
collection. There is other stuff also. I also use PhotoTip for
getting pictures ready for use in Calamus."

Phantomm tells Edward:

"I have a TT/MSTE version that you select with a jumper.
What type of Nova Graphics card will work on the Hades?

I have Various DTP programs, and don't use them as much as I use to.
Years ago, I was into PageStream, recently I got a package called
QuickForms for PageStream that has a CD full of Forms, templates,
fonts and etc for PageStream and other DTP applications. There are
Calamus fonts on it as well. This package also came with 2 3 1/2
disks and a manual. Haven't fully explored it yet, but it has
gotten me interested in DTP again.

It's hard for me to choose which way to go with DTP. I have the
full version of PageStream, plus extra software and etc for it.
So I can use it as is, knowing I have the latest version.

I have Calamus SL, Papyrus Gold v.5, Calligrapher Gold and a few
others. PageStream is the only one I have really used so I know it
well. Papyrus Gold looks really good to me, but I would want to
upgrade to the latest version. I think version 5 supports colour,
but not sure if there are major bugs in it that would prevent me
from really using it.

I'd like to find a update release notes for each release of Papyrus
Gold, Calamus SL, and Calligrapher Gold. I'm not sure if
Calligrapher is still supported or how far any upgrades went. I
also like to know about any printer support. These probably use
NVDI which I have. I like the idea of using a DTP product that can
use some of the latest printers if any. Using NVDI or Not.

I would be using the DTP software on a Falcon. Either with a
standard CPU or upgraded with CT2B or Nemesis. Or MSTE with a Nova
Graphics Card.

PhotoTip, I don't recall that one at the moment. Is that anything like PhotoLine?

BTW, do you know if Apex Media will run on the Hades?"

Edward replies:

"I have a Nova Graphics Plus card, PCI version, with 4 meg of Ram.

I also have PageStream. Great Program. It is on my STe.

You should use Calamus SL. It is an excellent program and offers more features than PageStream. It is a little hard to use, but after you get the hang of it, it's easy. I also have Papyrus Gold version 10 and it is super.

I also have NVDI version 5.03 and an old Epson Photo 700 color printer which does an decent job. Papyrus and Calamus uses it just fine. There is a separate module for Calamus called VDIprint which lets Calamus use any printer that I have set up with using NVDI.

PhotoTip is not really like PhotoLine but then it is. PhotoTip is meant to be used with a digital camera, but can be used without one. It also will take a photo and will allow one to change it in most any way possible.

I am not sure [about Apex Media]. Have not tried that one."

'Paolo' adds:

"Well, Photoline ST (or TT) is a GREAT and faster and cheaper alternative to Photoshop for everyday jobs. Then I use GEMgraph (not for pure graphics, but for calc/publishing) I used OverlayII for title animations. I still thing it's great, but the low resolution limits somehow its utility (I can use it only in not-full-screen titling)."

Phantomm adds:

"Yes I agree Photoline is good. I was just looking thru a Computer Mag that I got in the mail that sells all types of Graphics/Audio software and hardware for the PC and Mac. Some of the prices for Graphic software was hard to believe, for example AutoDesk Maya 7 Unlimited runs from $7000 to $9000 US!!

It must very nice for that price. Others run anywhere from $100 to $2000.

I've not used Overlay II before, can one still get the full version? I have a few Genlocks that I can use for doing titles and graphics in video. There are software only packages that can do similar results. BitBopper, can do some amazing things. The full version was released and still can be downloaded as far as I know. Every Falcon owner should get this one."

Edward Baiz asks a question about MiNT:

"I am in process of re-installing MintNet. Things are mostly up and running. I do have get Mint connected to the Internet using my Ethernet card and I have to get X Window running. I used EasyMint and I noticed some files were not installed because of what I think is because the names wee too long. Sounds strange, but that is what I am getting. If I take the X11.tar file and extract it under Magic, things are ok. If I try the same under Mint, I am certain files are not extracted. I am getting an error that the file cannot be created and am denied access. If the name is too long what I can do to fix it? Should I use the ADDMEM program? I use it for Magic, but not for Mint. Suggestions?"

Ronald Hall starts with the more obvious questions:

"You do have an ext2 partition, right?"

Edward replies:

"Yes I do.

Well now I found out the problem. It is not MintNet it is the Thing desktop. When I load in Jinnee I can display all the files in question, but when Thing is up I cannot as it reports the file names are too long. Any Thing experts out there. What is the latest version. I am using 1.27."

Ronald tells Edward:

"That is a limitation of Thing. I've heard rumors that the last (unreleased) version addressed this, but its not available as far as I know. I've got v1.27 as well, registered.

Have you tried Teradesk as a replacement desktop? I believe it has support for those really long filenames, and its still supported and being developed."

Edward tells Ronald:

"I will give that a try. I forgot about that. Thanks for reminding me."

Martin Byttebier adds:

"That's a Thing 1.27 problem. The latest available version is Thing 1.27. There is also Thing 1.29 - which doesn't have that long file problem - but that version has only been distributed amongst beta tester. Some years ago there was in this newsgroup an announcement of Thomas Binder. He stated that everyone interested in the latest beta version could get it from him. Since then I wrote numerous mails to him but never got a reply back. :-(

Anyway if you feel comfortable with Jinnee do use it. It works very good under MiNT. Under Thing 1.27 you still can see these too long files names with the shell."

Edward does a little bit of checking and tells Martin:

"I found out that I do have version 1.29 Beta and it does display
the files in question that 1.27 does not. It is only in German
however, but that is ok. I want to re-install Mint using Easymint
and will give that a try and see just how it goes.

Yes Jinnee does work ok, but the color is screwed up. I have N.AES
version 2 and Jinnee works best in the 16-bit mode, not the 24 or
32-bit modes. I did try and use it to install Easymint, but it did
not work too well."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week,
same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they say
when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - E3 2006: Picks and Pans!
   """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Video Game Console Wars!
                                      Microsoft Fires Back!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
   """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

                     E3 2006: Picks and Pans

It's a tough job, we know. But someone's gotta do it. We trekked to Los
Angeles this week for the Electronic Entertainment Expo, the annual
showcase for the latest and greatest in gaming. We braved long lines and
played plenty of video games to find out what's hot - and what's not.
Here's our take on this year's show.

Best of Show

In Control: It was great to see Nintendo's Wii controller in action. Motion
detection in the device lets you mimic your game's steering wheel, sword,
gun, bow and arrow, tennis racquet and more. A built-in speaker gives
further feedback, such as the twang of a bow in Zelda. Meanwhile, Sony's
standard PlayStation 3 wireless controller will have six degrees of

freedom: It can maneuver through the X, Y, and Z axis, so you can rotate, pitch, and roll through most all aspects of gameplay. We tried the controller ourselves, and it worked particularly well with WarHawk. The Nintendo has the edge on uniqueness and sheer innovation, but the Playstation 3 is expected to be a much more powerful machine when it launches on November 17 in the U.S. priced at $499 (20GB) and $599 (60GB).

Biggest Coup?: It took several months for the hugely popular Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas to arrive on the Xbox after its PS2 debut, but this is set to change as the battle between the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 gets under way. Grand Theft Auto IV will be available simultaneously for both platforms when it launches on October 16th, 2007. Moreover, Microsoft and Rockstar Games have entered into a strategic partnership for exclusive "episode content" to be delivered via Xbox Live.

Ole Ole: The biggest sporting event in the world this year is the soccer World Cup and as much as I'm looking forward to spending some long nights soaking up the atmosphere through my television tube, I can't wait to do likewise with Konami's Winning Eleven: Pro Evolution Soccer 2007. Personally, after playing an early build at the show, I still believe it to be the best soccer game franchise. The new title is slated for a January 2007 release on Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, PS2, PC, and PSP. Although the Playstation 3 wasn't mentioned, it's widely expected that Konami will still come to the party on the front. If not, I guess I'll stay an Xbox 360 man.

Tripping Down Arcade Game Alley: In Kentia Hall, the Electronic Software Association had a cool display that was easy to get lost in for a few minutes - or hours. The display included an array of old console video games, set up with cartridges for you to play at will (among those represented: Atari 2600 and ColecoVision), boxes of old handheld and console games, and - best yet - several rows of beloved arcade games, no quarters required. I personally spent a little time revisiting my misspent youth on Galaga and Ms. PacMan?and Atari 2600 Missile Command (incidentally, someone bought that cartridge for all of $1, according to its red tag).

Mobile Games Take Flight: Just like the casual hop-in, hop-out games seemed to have a lot of buzz (especially as part of Microsoft Xbox Live Arcade program), so too did mobile games. That Nokia was exhibiting on the show floor with N-Gage titles wasn't surprising. However, even heavyweights Electronic Arts and Vivendi Universal had mobile divisions showcasing quick-hit games, including Flying Toaster, Eragon, and Tetris. And Microsoft's Live Anywhere initiative will be compatible across hundreds of handsets - not just Windows Mobile.

Scene and Heard

Sign of the Times: Frogger Turns 25. Sigh. Where did the time go?

Console Wars: At every E3, much of the buzz around the show involves one basic question: How are Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo doing? The consensus among people I talked to seemed to be that Nintendo's Wii has everyone intrigued, that Microsoft had a good show (as it would, given it has the only next-generation console that's actually available), and that the PlayStation 3 has a bit of a me-too feel about it.

Booth Babes: Exhibitors faced $5000 fines this year if their promotional models were deemed too skimpy by the convention organizers. I'm told this E3 wasn't quite as crazy as some in years gone by, but it is still

definitely a trade show for those 18 years and over.

Microsoft to Gamers: We're Sorry: The behemoth of Redmond isn't known for its manners, but its launch of a new "Games for Windows" marketing campaign was built around the notion that the company hasn't taking Windows seriously enough as a gaming platform, and will try to do better from now on. In meetings with multiple Microsoft executives, we heard them issue abject apologies to the gaming community again and again. And again.

Long Lines Everywhere: At the Sony booth, there were rows of PlayStation 3 game demos as far as the eye could see, and you could play to your heart's content. But Nintendo hid the Wii console in a private area, and even before E3 officially opened, the wait to get in was more than an hour long. (I never made it into the demo, but my colleague Danny Allen did and blogged about it. Long, snaking lines of attendees were also seen waiting for demos of Spore (a new game from Will Wright, creator of the Sims) and Stranglehold (an action game whose creative personnel include Chow Yun Fat and John Woo)...and at every Starbucks on the premises.

Holy Celebrity Spotting, Batman!: Another extremely long line of attendees formed to get autographs from none other than the Caped Crusader himself, Adam West. Actually, Batman references are inappropriate here: West appeared in his capacity of the voice of the Mayor on Family Guy, which 2K is turning into a game. And given the age of many of the signature-seekers, I'm not even sure if all of them know that West once wore a cape and utility belt.

Get in the Game

Scarface Revisionism: Spoiler alert! In Brian DePalma's 1983 crime drama Scarface, Miami thug Tony Montana (Al Pacino) comes to a violent and, almost anyone would concede, richly-deserved end. But in Vivendi Universal's new game based on the movie - originally due last year and now supposedly arriving this fall - you play Tony, and the goal is to escape the shootout and go on merrily setting up front operations, assaulting people, swearing up a storm, and selling massive amounts of cocaine. Judging from the demo, eliminating the movie's hard-nosed moral may also remove much of what makes it memorable.

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Casualware?: Everywhere I went, vendors seemed to be talking up the importance of "casual gaming" - gaming experiences that don't require a massive investment of time (or a pricey, high-end computer) to enjoy. Games, in other words, for everyone. Sounds good to me, although most of the show's big launches still seemed to target hardcore gamers.

Get Your Body Moving: From the latest in Konami's Dance Dance Revolution to Nintendo's Wii and Nunchuk controllers and Sony's wireless controller with multi-axis sensitivity, the industry is now rife with ways for gamers to get off their couches and throw their bodies into action, literally. In a way, this is a great step for those who have long since worn out their trigger, err, thumb muscles. However, I can see the increase in medical

claims already, for former couch potatoes who throw their shoulder out after an overly enthusiastic serve in a Wii tennis match.

Oddest Comeback: Sierra showed off Flying Toasters, a cell-phone game based on After Dark, the popular screensaver of the 1990s. In this epic space drama, you, um, pilot a flying toaster which cruises through space, zapping slices of bread and bagels.

Now That's High Definition: Am I playing a game, or have I been inserted into an environment? PlayStation 3 games like Gran Turismo HD, presented in splendor at full 1920 by 1080p resolution, have such highly detailed artwork that it's sometimes possible to forget you're actually in a game, not a real, movie-like environment. The flyover of the Grand Canyon in Gran Turismo looks as photorealistic as it gets. At some point in the not-too-distant future, I'm convinced we'll start to see some of the same CG-generated animations that are used in films trickle into the environments that make up the next generation of gaming in high-def.

Build Your Own Darth Vader: LucasArts' Star Wars Lego II seems like lots of fun. But an equally-as-big a hit at the LucasArts by-appointment-only room was this bin of Star Wars Lego characters pieces parts. The bin always seemed to have a queue of folks trying to find the matching bits to create a mini-Lego Vader or Skywalker. The stormtroopers, at least, were easy to find.

Less Than Impressed

Inevitable Yet Stlll Peculiar TV Adaptation: Buena Vista Games showed a game based on Desperate Housewives.

Biggest Pet Peeve: Running out of time to try Spore, brainchild of Will Wright, creator of the Sims. This looks to be one of the most innovative software titles in some time so I was disappointed to miss out on my chance to fight with other pet creature creations in the tide pool and evolve into a tribe, city and civilization before exploring space. There is some good news though; an official trailer is now available to watch online.

Where's the Wi-Fi?: Bringing you the latest news amongst the crowds at big trade shows like E3 is a (mostly enjoyable) challenge unto itself, but this year it was doubly so. Given that my hotel's wired and wireless networks were inexplicitly unavailable, I came to rely on the courtesy Wi-Fi provided at E3's media room. Murphy's Law being what it is, this also came crashing to a halt. Many of us refugees turned to the paid Wi-Fi, which we soon overburenedd to a slow crawl. The moral of the story: if staying in touch on the road is an absolute must, then invest in some form of mobile broadband or a laptop alternative such a Treo hybrid phone. In my case, I eventually McGyvered a temporary, yet speedy solution by innocuously using the network cable from one of the many VoIP phones strewn about the media room? just to see if it would work, of course.

Where's my HDMI?: Given all the buzz about next-generation gaming platforms, it was hard to overlook the fact that the lower-end $500 PlayStation 3 would not include an HDMI port. Of course, nor, for that matter, does the Xbox 360--an omission that's rather critical when you consider why you should bother upgrading to an HD DVD drive at all if you can't output at the maximum digital resolution HD DVD movies are capable of delivering.

Console Systems for Movies? Nah: Given the lack of HDMI output on Xbox 360

and the lower-end PS3, it's hard to take either console seriously as a platform to grow the audience for the next-gen movie formats on HD DVD and Blu-ray Disc. No HDCP-protected output like HDMI means that as soon as studios start to implement Image Constraint Token (ICT, a component of the AACS content protection system) - which they may very well choose to do as time wears on - that so-called next-gen console is going to feel pretty much like a large doorstop, if you planned on it doubling as your movie player.

Video Game Console Wars Approach Climax

After years of promises and high expectations, consumers will finally be able to purchase next-generation video game consoles as the industry's painful transition to the latest technology comes to an end later this year.

In the fall, Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Co.'s Wii systems are expected to join Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 on store shelves - a relief to game publishers who have seen sales plummet as consumers waited in recent months for the latest gear.

But as the hype is replaced by actual gaming systems, the latest "console wars" will enter a new phase, potentially shifting the balance of an industry whose total sales top Hollywood's domestic box office receipts.

During this week's Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, the big three console makers gave an important glimpse into the future - and further fueled questions about which maker will come up on top.

Will Sony's current dominance continue with its PlayStation 3 or will its high price tag send fans looking elsewhere? Will Microsoft's early release of its Xbox 360 snag it more market share? Or will the intuitive remote control that's offered with Nintendo's Wii prove to be the greatest draw?

On the exhibition floor, at least, Nintendo's sprawling booth appeared to be the hit of the show. Throngs of attendees crowded in lines that snaked around the Los Angeles Convention Center in order to get a first try at Wii games.

But Colin Sebastian, an analyst with Lazard Capital Markets, said he was particularly impressed with the inroads Microsoft has made in an industry Sony dominated with its PlayStation 2. He predicted Microsoft and Sony each grabbing 40 percent of the next-generation market, with Nintendo keeping a strong hold on the remaining 20 percent.

In the more distant future, the video game business will only improve, predicted Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, which organizes E3.

"The truth is it's not terribly important how many units of hardware and software are sold in 2006," he said. "Don't get me wrong - it is important to individual companies - but it is less important for the industry collectively. The real issue is how this year positions the industry for the future. That is, after all, what transitions are all about."

And in that regard, most see a lot of opportunity.

Shane Kim, general manager for Microsoft Game Studios, also predicted strong growth in the coming years.

"I think the signs are all positive," he said. "With the competition now finally entering the market later this year, I think it will start to remove that uncertainly so customers will be able to make some better decisions, because some have been waiting, frankly, wondering 'What are my options going to be?'"

According to market research firm NPD Group, overall video game sales dropped 5 percent to $7 billion in the U.S. last year as gamers waited for the new systems. Top game publishers such as Electronic Arts Inc., Activision Inc. and THQ Inc. have lost millions recently due to slow sales.

But tough times might not go away so quickly.

Availability, which plagued Microsoft's Xbox 360 last fall, might turn out to be a continuing problem, particularly for Sony. With only 4 million PS3 units expected to be available through the end of the year, analysts and industry insiders already predict there will be shortages.

Consumers also could balk at the price tags, particularly on the PlayStation 3.

At its Nov. 17 launch, Sony will offer a $499 model that features a 20 gigabyte hard drive but not some important features such as a special output for high-definition video, a memory card slot and built-in wireless. Buyers will have to cough up $599 for those extras, plus a more spacious 60 gigabyte disk drive.

Though some critics say the console is too expensive, Sony has insisted the prices are suitable considering what's under the hood.

"I think that it just demonstrates that the early adopters of this technology are much less price sensitive," Sebastian said. "You have a lot of first movers who are going to buy whatever Sony ships."

The PS3 will pack a Blu-ray disc drive for displaying high-definition graphics and movies, and a high-speed "Cell" processor promises high performance inside the sleek black or silver case.

The PS3 also has a controller that looks much like the one for the older PlayStation 2, but can be moved around to control action on the screen.

Control is the central element of Nintendo's Wii (pronounced "we"), where button-encrusted controllers have been replaced with TV-remote style wands players simply wave around to hit tennis balls or steer off-road racers.

Nintendo officials said they're focused on providing a platform for unique games rather than a high-tech, do-it-all networked media hub. The company has kept quiet on price, but some analysts have estimated it to cost between $200 and $300.

"What we are trying to do with the new machine is completely different from what Sony and Microsoft are trying to do," Nintendo Co. President Satoru Iwata said.

Microsoft, meanwhile, continues to offer the same two flavors of its Xbox 360, which debuted last November.

A "Core System" model without a hard drive comes in at $299, while the $399 model adds a hard drive but still lacks built-in wireless receiver (which remains a $100 add-on accessory). This week, the company said an HD-DVD drive for movies would be available by the end of the year.

The key element to which system succeeds will be the video games themselves.

While the manufacturers generally sell the consoles for a loss, they recoup the costs through licensing agreements and sales of software and accessories. Online capabilities are adding new revenue streams such as micropayments for additional game chapters and virtual items.

Each manufacturer announced a lineup of exclusive games that includes "Super Mario Galaxy" for the Wii, the shooter "Gears of War" for Xbox 360 and the frenetic action game "Heavenly Sword" for PS3.

Microsoft Fires Back in Xbox Patent Dispute

Microsoft has filed a countersuit against Lucent Technologies in a dispute over Microsoft's alleged misuse of patented technology in its Xbox 360 games console.

In court papers filed earlier this week, Microsoft denied infringing Lucent's patent and argued that it is invalid anyway, in part because Lucent failed to disclose "prior art" when it made its application to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO). Prior art refers to existing inventions in the field where a patent is being sought. Microsoft also accused Lucent of infringing several Microsoft patents.

Lucent filed its suit against Microsoft at the end of March, arguing that technology used in the Xbox 360 for decoding MPEG-2 video files infringes on one of its patents. It requested a trial and monetary damages but stopped short of seeking an injunction to prevent Microsoft from selling the console.

The patent in question is Number 5,227,878, "Adaptive Coding and Decoding of Frames and Fields of Video," and can be viewed by searching at the USPTO Web site. The suits were filed in the U.S. District Court, Southern District of California.

The dispute dates back to 2003, when Lucent filed other lawsuits against Dell and Gateway over the same patent. Microsoft stepped in because of an indemnity agreement it had with the computer makers, suing Lucent in an effort to gain a judgment of noninfringement of the patent.

Microsoft was successful - a judge granted it summary judgment in the case last year on the grounds that Lucent's patent contained a typographical error. Lucent had the patent corrected by the USPTO, however, and filed its new lawsuit against Microsoft this year.

In a statement this week, Microsoft Deputy General Counsel Tom Burt said the company stands by its intellectual property and its partners. He accused Lucent of choosing to litigate rather than engaging in "meaningful license negotiations."

If the case comes to trial, some legal experts see Lucent seeking an
injunction to block Microsoft's sale of the Xbox 360. Others say that
because the case has a complicated history, such a measure would probably
be years away.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Internet Searches May Yield Risky Results

McAfee's SiteAdvisor team unveiled on Friday the results of a four-month
study that examined online safety for search engine users.

"The rise of Internet search brings a new type of risk. Hostile Web sites
might seek to harm users or take advantage of them-whether through spyware,
spam, scams, or other bad practices-ecause search engines often do not
filter these sites from their results," McAfee said in its study.

The study was conducted from January through April 2006 and focused on five
main search engines, including Google, Yahoo, MSN, AOL, and Ask.com. McAfee
utilized SiteAdvisor software to address and analyze Web-safety issues.

SiteAdvisor evaluates potential security concerns for any Web site. It
tests each site for exposure to "risky" content including spyware, adware,
phishing, and other online exploits and then offers a safety rating via a
red, yellow, or green icon. McAfee acquired SiteAdvisor in early April
2006.

"The search engines themselves had some differences [in terms of trends]
but the bottom line message to consumers is that all major search engines
returned some risky stuff, so consumers need to exercise caution when using
them," said Shane Keats, market strategist for McAfee SiteAdvisor.

The SiteAdvisor study found that all of the search engines tested directed
users to "risky" sites, particularly when searching for popular keywords.
MSN search results had the lowest percentage (3.9%) of risky returns, while
Ask.com had the highest percentage (6.1%).

The study estimated that approximately 285 million clicks to hostile sites
occur every month through search queries.

"You also have to think about going to sites without using a search
engine-what are the chances of accessing risky content that way," said
Danny Sullivan, editor of Search Engine Watch. "Also, almost all of the
major search engines already have tools to show users which sites may have
[security issues]."

Paid ad-sponsored links were found to be the most perilous. The study
showed 8.5% of sponsored links led users to non-secure sites, as opposed
to 3.1% of non-sponsored links.

"Across all search terms we analyze, a Google ad is on average more than twice as likely to take a user to an unsafe site as a Google organic link. At Ask, the difference is especially pronounced: Their sponsored results are almost four times as risky as their organic listings," the study said.

Among the keywords that were found to yield riskier Web site results were "singers," "digital music," "free screensavers," and "popular software," among others. The study found that younger users were often the ones searching for such phrases.

"We're seeing people are increasingly going to search engines as their gateway to the Internet, and not surprisingly the [adware and spammer] guys are following," Keats said. "Think of search engines as a super highway-a great place to get places quickly [on the Internet], but that highway can have holes in it. SiteAdvisor tries to help you find the holes before you hit them."

For example, SiteAdvisor rated the fan site for Disney's The Lion King with a red icon because the site's guestbook exposed viewers e-mail addresses to the general public-ncluding spammers. The site owner sent an e-mail to ask about the red rating, so SiteAdvisor explained the situation and went on to help secure the e-mail addresses. SiteAdvisor then changed the site's rating to green.

McAfee offers its pro-active approach to Web safety by way of a free software download.

"At some point we'll be offering additional premium features, although we're not sure what features there will be or when the deluxe version will be offered," Keats said.

Yahoo Inc. Overhauls Home Page

Yahoo Inc.'s Web site unveiled a new look Tuesday as the Internet powerhouse strives to remain the world's most popular online destination and strengthen its advertising appeal.

The overhaul marks the first facelift to Yahoo's home page since September 2004.

The redesigned page includes more interactive features that reduce the need to click through to other pages to review the weather, check e-mail, listen to music or monitor local traffic conditions.

Another addition, called "Yahoo Pulse," offers recommendations and insights about cultural trends culled from the Web site's 402 million users worldwide.

Yahoo is making the upgrade as it battles for traffic with longtime rivals MSN, AOL and Google Inc. while also trying to fend off an intensifying threat posed by the rise of social networking sites such as MySpace.com.

"Our goal is to have the best page on the Internet," said Dan Rosensweig, Yahoo's chief operating officer. "We feel like this (redesign) does something great for everybody."

Sunnyvale, Calif.-based Yahoo regards the latest changes as the most dramatic renovations made to its front page since the site's 1994 debut as a bare-bones directory developed by Stanford University students Jerry Yang and David Filo.

The new look is long overdue, said Jupiter Research analyst David Card. "The site was getting pretty long in the tooth and looking pretty old fashioned," he said. "Now, it looks clean, crisp and modern."

Even so, Card believes Yahoo's upgrades won't impress younger, cutting-edge Web surfers who are spending an increasing amount of time hanging out at MySpace.com. "They didn't really push the envelope very hard."

The most notable changes will allow Yahoo users to pull down interactive menus giving them snapshots of weather, traffic and movie information as well as providing instant access to the site's popular e-mail, instant messaging and music services.

Like other widely visited Web sites, Yahoo must balance its desire to keep pace with the Internet's constantly shifting trends with the recognition that changing things too dramatically might alienate a large number of users comfortable with the status quo.

Yahoo settled on the final redesign, code-named "Spirit," after months of testing with selected users. As another precaution, the new look won't show up as the default page of Yahoo.com for several more months.

"Any time you touch the most visited page on the Internet, it's going to feel like a big change and we think this is a really big change," Rosensweig said.

Microsoft Corp.'s MSN and Time Warner Inc.'s AOL, the two most visited Web sites after Yahoo, also have tweaked their looks during the past year.

Although Google still provides a page featuring little else than its Internet-leading search engine, it also offers an option that enables users to customize the home page to suit their personal tastes.

In April, Yahoo led the pack with 105.4 million unique U.S. visitors, an 11 percent increase from last year, according to Nielsen/NetRatings Inc. MSN ranked second with 92.8 million visitors, a 6 percent increase from last year, followed closed by Google, whose traffic surged 27 percent during the past year to 92.1 million. AOL's traffic remained flat at 70.4 million, Nielsen/NetRatings said.

Meanwhile, MySpace's traffic – consisting mostly of teens and young adults – has more than quadrupled during the past year to 38.4 million U.S. visitors. What's more, MySpace's visitors viewed a total of 19 billion pages on the site in April, surpassing Google (11.9 billion pages), MSN (11.5 billion pages) and AOL (6.8 billion pages).

Yahoo remains the Web's most viewed site, serving up 31.2 billion pages in April, but some analysts believe MySpace's rapid growth foreshadows a changing of the guard.

"The bar keeps getting raised," said Gartner Inc. analyst Mike McGuire. "I think you are going to see constant tweaking because of sites like MySpace."

Remaining the most trafficked and viewed Web site is important to Yahoo

because those measures are critical to the advertisers that provide the company with most of its profits.

As it is, Yahoo's earnings haven't been growing rapidly as Google's - a factor that has weighed on Yahoo's stock price, which has dropped by 21 percent so far this year. Meanwhile, Google's stock price has declined by 9 percent.

Sony Shows Smallest Vaio PC Yet

For the first time in two years Sony is updating its Vaio U ultra-compact PC line with a new model that is the smallest Vaio yet developed, the company said today.

The UX50 packs a Windows XP-based PC into a case about the size of a paperback book. Like previous models it has a touchscreen display. This model's screen slides up to reveal a full QWERTY keyboard underneath. The keyboard was added because some customers expressed frustration with the previous model that using the touchscreen was troublesome, said Yoshihisa Ishida, head of Sony's Vaio division, at a news conference here.

The model announced Tuesday has a 30GB hard drive but Sony is also developing a model that uses 16GB of flash memory in place of the disk drive. More details on this computer, a prototype of which Ishida showed today, are due in late June and the computer will likely go on sale in the middle of this year, he said.

Compared to a hard drive, flash memory uses less power, is lighter and smaller; however drives are also more expensive. That coupled with supply constraints is one reason why flash memory hasn't been put to more widespread use in computers, said Ishida.

The flash-based Vaio U will be more expensive than the hard drive-based model, he said, but he wouldn't disclose any pricing details of the yet-to-be announced machine.

Currently a 16 gigabit flash-memory chip is selling for about $36 on the spot market, according to prices quoted by DRAMExchange. That would make the cost of the chips alone for the 16GB drive around $288 if they were purchased on the spot market.

Other features of the UX50 computer announced Tuesday include an Intel Centrino Core Solo U1300 (1.06-GHz) processor, 512MB of memory, a 30GB hard drive, wireless LAN, Bluetooth, a built-in camera, fingerprint sensor, and reader for Felica contactless smart cards. It measures 5.9 inches by 1.3 inches by 3.7 inches and weighs 1.1 pounds.

It will go on sale in Japan on May 27 and in the U.S. in July. It will cost about $1800 in the U.S., Sony said.

Samsung Debuts Hybrid Hard Drive

Imagine a Windows laptop that could boot up as much as 25 seconds more quickly than usual, last up to 30 minutes longer on battery power, and be

as much as five times more reliable than existing PCs. That is Samsung's vision for the value of its new Hybrid Hard Drive (HHD), a next-generation drive that combines flash memory with traditional rotating magnetic storage.

The company announced the drive on Wednesday and will be showing it at the Windows Hardware Engineering Conference in Seattle, Washington, next week.

The magnetic storage part of the drive will provide the high storage densities found in standard hard-drive technology, while the flash part of the drive will provide the reliability, the fast read-write access, and the low power consumption, Samsung said.

When flash memory is being used, the hard drive remains idle which, according to Samsung, can save battery power and make the drive less susceptible to damage. The hard drive spins to "flush out" memory a few times every 10 to 20 minutes, then returns to its idle state unless it is needed.

Microsoft sees the product as complementing the upcoming Windows Vista operating system.

"Hybrid hard disks and Windows ReadyDrive Technology are integrated advancements that improve the performance and reliability of computers using Windows Vista, especially notebook computers," said Mike Sievert, Microsoft's corporate vice president in the Windows Client Marketing division, in a statement.

It is expected that the hybrid drives will be marketed under the ReadyDrive brand name and released in coordination with Vista's rollout.

Industry observers were divided on the value and viability of this hybrid approach. "These kinds of drives have the best of both worlds and this could be a great drive for consumers wanting to use their PCs for entertainment," said Nicole d'Onofrio, an analyst at research firm Current Analysis. "I estimate we'll see other manufacturers with hybrids by the end of this year or beginning of 2007."

But Joseph Unsworth, a principal analyst at Gartner, questioned whether Intel's upcoming Robson technology could overtake this market need. "Robson offers flash right on the chipset," he said. "We're going to see a lot of notebooks with Robson, and you don't need Vista to run it." He said he expects Robson to be out in first quarter of 2007.

Gartner analyst John Monroe downplayed the value of the Samsung HHD technology. "There is nothing new in having cache on a hard drive - it's been done for years," he said. "The basic difference here is that it is bigger and nonvolatile. The main reason you would need it is because Vista takes so long to boot."

With mobile devices, it might have some value, he said. "But probably not with desktop machines, which are often left on."

Apple's New Intel-Based MacBook Now Available

Apple Tuesday announced immediate availability of its consumer Intel-based laptop, well in time for the back-to-school shopping season. Called the

MacBook, this model equipped with a 13.3-inch wide screen and running on a Core Duo processor replaces the 12-inch G4 PowerBook and all iBooks.

The notebook also complements Apple's recently released MacBook Pro laptops, which reportedly have experienced overheating and other technical problems. (Some Mac enthusiast sites are posting links to software that monitors the temperature of MacBook Pros.)

The MacBook is slimmer and slightly heavier than the old 12-inch Apple laptops. It comes in black or white and with either a 1.83-GHz or a 2.0-GHz Core Duo processor. Like the MacBook Pro, the MacBook comes with a built-in Webcam, Front Row media software, and an infrared remote control. It also has DVI-out support, gigabit ethernet, Bluetooth 2.0, 802.11g Wi-Fi, and optical digital audio-in and-out.

Apple priced its standard configurations of the MacBook at between $1099 and $1499. However, PC World's preferred configuration - with a 2.0-GHz processor, 1GB of RAM, and a 100GB hard drive - would cost $1699. Apple isn't offering a sub-$1000 configuration with an Intel Core Solo processor as it is with the $599 Mac Mini desktop PC.

IDC analyst Richard Shim says that the MacBook pricing makes sense given the more expensive, less common 13.3-inch wide-screen panel, whose resolution is 1280 by 800 pixels. "We're obviously not looking at a mass-market price point, and that's obviously by choice," says Shim. "But their challenge, of course, if you talk to Wall Street, is to increase their market share. This won't get them there."

Like the feature set on the current MacBook Pro, this one doesn't include a modem (a $49 accessory) or an optical drive that writes to double-layer DVD media. When we reviewed the MacBook Pro, Apple said that its current optical drive supplier doesn't offer double-layer write support for drives that fit into the thinner laptop. Apple wasn't available for comment for this story.

The MacBook, which comes with an integrated Intel GMA 950 graphics processor, does not include an option for discreet graphics. This a sticking point for users such as "Mashugly," the founder of The OSx86 Project, a site focused on Mac OSX and Intel-based hardware. "The only thing that would keep me from [the MacBook] is the integrated graphics," asserts Mashugly, who says that otherwise the MacBook is "probably the best entry-level notebook that I've seen."

Mashugly also says that he hopes Apple has resolved reported technical problems with currently shipping MacBook Pros. These problems include faulty latches, uneven screen brightness, and heat issues that PC World reader Jim Kenton calls "egg-frying hot."

"I can't recommend to my friends to buy a Mac laptop right now because of the quality issues," Mashugly says. "That's really sad. I mean, I run a Mac forum. When you have the faithful telling their friends that you should wait until the next revision, that's not a good situation."

AOL Buys Company That Inserts Video Ads

AOL LLC, signaling the importance online video will play in drawing visitors to its ad-supported Web sites, has purchased a small company that

specializes in inserting advertising into video clips.

With the technology from Lightningcast Inc., AOL would be able to run targeted ads within video and even change ads from time to time without replacing the entire video file. Lightningcast's technology also can insert ads into audio clips.

Financial terms of the deal, announced Thursday, were not disclosed.

AOL already has been using Lightningcast's platform since 2002. By acquiring the company, AOL can better integrate sales and operations with Advertising.com, the online ad business AOL bought in June 2004.

"This acquisition will provide a huge infusion of talent, technology and publisher relationships for Advertising.com at a time when streaming video is growing at a blistering pace," Mike Kelly, president of AOL Media Networks, said in a statement.

Last month, AOL won the first Daytime Emmy presented for content delivered via the Internet, cell phones and other small-screen devices. Last July's "Live 8" concert special - delivered in seven separate feeds, all without the meltdowns common with early online video events - was widely seen as a milestone in Internet video.

AOL later launched with Warner Bros. the "In2TV" broadband network featuring free viewing of dozens of old television shows like "Welcome Back Kotter," "Sisters" and "Growing Pains." AOL and Warner Bros. are both units of Time Warner Inc.

And earlier this month, AOL quietly opened its test of UnCut Video, a site where users can share clips they made with camera phones and camcorders, competing with the likes of Google Inc.'s video service and YouTube Inc.

Lightningcast's technology works with all types of video - live, on-demand streaming and downloads.

The development comes as AOL intensifies efforts at driving traffic to free, ad-supported sites to compensate for declines in its traditional business of Internet access subscriptions.

But AOL faces immense competition.

Apple Computer Inc.'s iTunes Music Store and Google Video offer clips for sale, generally $1.99 for an episode of a television show.

CBS Corp. recently launched an ad-supported broadband channel, "innertube," with specially created Web series and material that has already run on television.

The Walt Disney Co.'s ABC is experimenting with making popular shows available for free on its Web site, complete with ads that cannot be skipped.

Chat Rooms Help FBI Hunt for Pedophiles

Seconds after she announces her presence in an online chat room, the girl is besieged by a half-dozen men who want to know more about her.

"r u a virgin?" one man asks, after about a dozen quick exchanges that begin with her age (13) and why she is home on a school day (illness).

The edgy online banter is taking place in an AOL chat room ostensibly for women who like older men, but known as a forum for men who want to make contact with girls. The supposed 13-year-old in this case, though, is not a child, but an undercover FBI agent who is working out of the bureau's main child pornography unit in a suburban Washington office park.

The demonstration for an Associated Press reporter was intended to show off the FBI's growing effort to fight child pornography, which has yielded increases of more than 2000 percent in arrests and 350 percent in federal prosecutions over 10 years.

Agents use chats and other more private exchanges to seek out potential pedophiles and pornographers. Another man who believed he was talking to a 13-year-old asked how old she likes her men, then, "virgin?" The agents save transcripts of the online conversations, photographs that get exchanged and telephone numbers that are revealed, intentionally or not.

These introductory conversations, in some cases, lead to illegal activity; but the ease with which they're made show how large a problem looms. Child pornography is frighteningly easy to find on the Internet - images are traded freely, children are lured into dangerous situations and sexual abuse of children as young as infants is available on demand.

Finding people who want child pornography "is like shooting fish in a barrel," said Stacey Bradley, an FBI supervisory agent in the Innocent Images unit.

One out of every five children ages 10 to 17 receive sexual solicitations online, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

"The Internet is a great place, but there are certain parts of town you don't want to be," said Arnold Bell, chief of the FBI's Innocent Images unit.

There is wide agreement that images are proliferating and that peddlers of child pornography are becoming more savvy to counter the enhanced police effort to combat it.

Orin S. Kerr, a George Washington University law professor and expert on computer crime, said investigators posing as children typically steer clear of unfairly entrapping people on the other end of their online conversations by taking a passive approach.

"If agents are careful, entrapment never needs to come up. They take a suggestive screen name, go into a chat room and wait to be contacted. The screen will light up," Kerr said.

He said he was aware of only one case that was tossed out of court in which a state investigator, posing as a mother, was found to have improperly lured the defendant by aggressively pushing him to get involved with her children.

More often, authorities struggle to keep pace with the availability of sexually explicit pictures of children and a lingering view among the public that what advocates and police call child pornography often is women

dressing up to appear younger, said Ernie Allen, the missing and exploited children center's president.

The real danger that child pornography presents, shown in several recent cases of sexual abuse that have come to public attention, "is a phenomenon that American and the world has only begun to understand, " Allen said.

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently called attention to the issue in a speech filled with graphic images that he said was necessary to get the nation's attention.

On a recent day in the FBI unit, a working group that includes police officials from several countries was working a major investigation that appeared to reach into most states and dozens of countries, according to pins that were stuck into maps on the wall. Bell, the unit chief, would not discuss the investigation.

Several agents acknowledged that they can get discouraged by the volume of images and the number of people who appear eager to see them. Bradley, the FBI supervisor, estimated that 80 percent of the customers for child pornography are in the United States.

"But even if I stop just one person from getting molested, it makes a difference," she said.

The undercover agent chatted with one man for more than an hour. She tried to stay in character with frequent use of the word "like" and alternate spellings that produced "kewl" for cool.

This man sent a photograph, ostensibly of himself, showing a balding man with a mustache and beard. He said he had three grandchildren and asked whether the 13-year-old had a computer in her bedroom, a setup that would allow her easier access with less parental interference.

While this man mainly avoided risque questions and answers, the undercover agent regarded him as the most promising prospect for engaging in darker, possibly illegal exchanges, should they meet again online.

Researchers Warn of Fake Anti-Spyware

The latest report issued by Finjan's Malicious Code Research Center highlights the growth of several emerging breeds of cyber-attack, including the increasing popularity of so-called "ransomware" and viruses that are being spread via fake anti-spyware applications.

The anti-virus software maker's research arm said in its Web Security Trends Report, issued on May 16, that the growth of "rogue anti-spyware" and the emergence of hackers looking to hold stolen corporate data up for ransom are two of the fastest growing trends in the security threat landscape.

In general, virus rootkits continue to pose one of the most prevalent and challenging obstacles for IT administrators to overcome, according to the study.

Mirroring a trend that surfaced in the anti-virus community several years ago, the rise of rogue anti-spyware takes advantage of the public's

growing fear of spyware, said officials of Finjan, headquartered in San Jose, Calif.

In these attacks, hackers disguise the malware in programs advertised online as free anti-spyware applications. Once downloaded onto a user's computer, the applications may deliver their own payloads of malicious code or expose affected machines to subsequent attacks.

In some cases, said Yuval Ben-Itzhak, chief technology officer at Finjan, the false anti-spyware tools even run fake computer security scans that claim to find existing spyware programs on infected devices. The software then directs the computer's user to a Web site where the user is encouraged to purchase a full version of the free application already on the PC.

"The awareness of the average end user about spyware has increased, so dishonest people are trying to take advantage of that," Ben-Itzhak said. "There are also underground networks where this sort of code is being sold to anyone who wants it. I'm not sure who's paying for it, but it's being made widely available."

The maturation of the spyware industry to the point where attacks can outwardly appear to function just like the tools meant to fight them is just another piece of evidence of the increasing sophistication of the hackers creating such threats, he said.

As another sign of hackers' growing professionalism, Finjan officials pointed to the increasing frequency of ransomware attacks, in which hackers take over files on a specific computer and offer to unlock them only in exchange for some sort of payment. The programs typically scour a computer's hard drive looking for specific keywords that might denote documents containing personal or financial data.

In one recent case cited in the Finjan report, hackers used a spyware program known as CryZip to demand an electronic payment of $300 in order to release the data. The spyware uses archive software to create a password-protected archive on the infected computers that includes the files being taken hostage.

In order to collect, the program leaves a text message on the infected machines explaining what has been done and warning victims not to involve the police. The victim is promised a password with which to gain access to the archived files after the ransom is paid.

Another version of the program installs an annoying message on infected computers during their startup cycle that demands payment for its removal.

"For an experienced end user, something like this might pretty easy to get rid of, but the average user, especially at home or in a small business, isn't familiar enough to do anything about it," Ben-Itzhak said. "It's more evidence of the shift from kids who launch attacks because they want to shut down your machine, to criminals who want to keep it connected to the Web so they can continue to make money off of you."

New Trojan Horse Targets Microsoft Word

Microsoft Word users should be extra careful about the files they download because hackers are exploiting an unpatched vulnerability in the popular

word-processing software.

Security vendor McAfee warned users Thursday of a new Trojan horse program, called BackDoor-CKB!cfaae1e6, that secretly installs software on a computer. For the program to work, however, hackers must first trick users into opening a malicious Word document. Once that has been done, the results can be nasty.

Installed, the malware lets hackers "execute any external commands, download additional Trojans, capture desktop screen shots, monitor and record keystrokes or passwords," McAfee said in a statement on its Web site.

Unlike viruses and worms, Trojan horse programs do not make copies of themselves that keep spreading throughout the Internet. Hackers directly distribute the programs, which are often disguised as useful or interesting downloads.

Symantec confirmed that hackers are circulating the malware via malicious Word document e-mail attachments. But at present its use is "limited to attacks against select targets," Symantec said in a note on its DeepSight threat analysis service. The Trojan horse works on Microsoft Word 2003, but causes Word 2000 to crash without installing the malware, Symantec said.

Because users must download the malicious software in order to become infected, McAfee rates the risk from this Trojan horse as "low."

Blue Security Shuts Down Anti-Spam Service

Score one for the spammers. The company behind a controversial anti-spam initiative is shutting down the service after spammers began threatening users and rendering the company's site inaccessible.

In a statement, Blue Security Inc. said it wanted to avoid "an ever-escalating cyber war through our continued operations."

Blue Security has been criticized by some anti-spam advocates because its Blue Frog service revolves around getting thousands of users to collectively disable the Web sites that spammers use to sell their wares.

Users add e-mail addresses to Blue Frog's "do-not-spam" list. Before sending out a batch of messages, spammers are supposed to remove any addresses appearing on such lists.

If they don't, Blue Security activates software on users' computers to send complaints to spammers automatically. Hundreds of thousands complaining at once can knock out a Web site and, the company says, encourage spammers to stop.

But critics say the tactic resembles a denial-of-service attack, the type spammers used against Blue Security in retaliation.

Software Makers Crack Down on Net Piracy

Computer software makers launched a crackdown on illegal Internet sales of their products Tuesday by suing suspected pirates who have set up shop on the popular online auction site eBay Inc.

Usually fierce rivals Symantec Corp. and McAfee Inc. teamed up to kick off the crusade by targeting five different eBay sellers in three lawsuits filed Monday in a Los Angeles federal court.

"If online marketplaces are going to pursue the free-market ideals that they aspire to, they must make sure the products they sell are authentic," said Joe Fitzgerald, Symantec's vice president of intellectual property.

The two leading makers of antivirus software decided to sue after uncovering evidence that the individuals named in the complaints had completed more than 15,000 sales involving pirated software between October 2005 and December 2005, said Keith Kupferschmid, an executive with the Software & Information Industry Association.

The trade group is coordinating the software industry's efforts to patrol eBay and other Internet auction sites for pirates. Kupferschmid said the group intends to buy copies of pirated software in the auctions and then sue "egregious" copyright violators without forewarning. The industry expects to file the suits on a monthly basis.

The campaign isn't currently aimed at eBay or the buyers of pirated software.

Besides software makers, the association also represents a large number of providers of electronic information, including The Associated Press.

This week's initial burst of lawsuits named: Edward Cosmos of Bloomington, Calif.; Grace Chan of San Jose, Calif.; Kevin Liu of New Brunswick, N.J..; Mary Tian of New Brunswick, N.J.; and G.T. Tian of Highland Park, N.J.

"I did nothing wrong," said a man who identified himself as Liu after the AP sent an e-mail asking him to call. The man didn't respond to another question before the phone call abruptly ended.

Cosmos and the Tians didn't immediately respond to e-mails sent to their eBay profiles Tuesday. Chan's auction registration is no longer active, according to eBay. Efforts to locate a phone number for her were unsuccessful.

Cosmos and Chan received nothing but positive feedback from sellers, according to their eBay profiles. A few negative remarks were mixed with the mostly flattering commentary posted about Liu and the Tians on eBay's site.

The civil suits seek unspecified damages, as well as court orders to prevent future copyright and trademark infringement.

Software makers have long complained about pirates looting their sales. The industry estimates it loses $11 billion to $12 billion a year from the distribution of pirated software.

The industry believes 90 percent of all software sold on Internet auctions violates copyrights or licensing agreements, Kupferschmid said.

San Jose, Calif.-based eBay disagreed with those estimates. "We know

(piracy) is an issue, but we don't think it's a big problem," spokesman Hani Durzy said. Ebay supports the software industry's efforts to penalize pirates, Durzy said.

Copyright holders and eBay don't always agree on the definition of an improper sale.

For an example, a small business that bought a piece software that was never installed on a computer may have a legal right to sell the unopened copy on eBay, Durzy said, even though the manufacturer might disagree.

In auctions involving clear-cut cases of piracy, eBay removes the listing within hours, Durzy said.

But Kupferschmid said eBay sometimes takes several days before shutting down an auction of pirated software. He also expressed frustration with an eBay policy that allows sellers previously flagged for piracy to run future auctions.

"It's like playing 'Whack-A-Mole,' " Kupferschmid said. "You take one auction down and then another one pops up."

Employees Favor Personal Surfing

It should come as no surprise that most Americans with Internet access at work do some personal Web surfing on the job. A new survey finds that half of them would rather give up their morning coffee than forgo that ability.

Maps, news and weather are the chief nonwork-related sites visited.

A quarter of employees watch or listen to streaming media at least once a week from work, and 18 percent have downloaded and stored nonwork music, photos and video clips, according to a telephone-based survey sponsored by Websense Inc., which makes software that helps companies filter and monitor Internet use.

Many companies have Internet policies that ban pornography but allow reasonable personal Internet use, such as e-mailing a doctor to schedule an appointment or buying a gift during a lunch break.

According to the survey, 61 percent of employees with Internet access have spent at least some time accessing personal sites. The average is 3.1 hours a week, compared with 12.8 hours for work-related surfing.

The survey of 500 employees was conducted March 16 to April 4 by Harris Interactive. The random sample was limited to adults who work at a company with at least 100 employees and who have Internet access on the job. The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Supreme Court Lets eBay Keep Using 'Buy It Now'

In a decision giving eBay a new chance to fight an injunction against its "Buy It Now" pricing feature, the Supreme Court ruled Monday that a company found liable for patent infringement should not necessarily be forced to

stop using the patented technology.

The unanimous ruling may make it tougher for small firms to win such battles. The decision is a boost for big tech companies, which argue that patent holders would wield too much leverage if judges routinely imposed injunctions - on top of money damages - in patent lawsuits.

The court said that trial judges have discretion on whether to issue a permanent injunction, which was a victory for eBay. But it handed a small victory to challenger MercExchange, too. A lower court judge had said MercExchange shouldn't be granted an injunction because it doesn't actually make any product using the technology. Thus, it couldn't be hurt by eBay's continued use of the technology. The Supreme Court rejected such reasoning.

"The court went out of its way to reject broad rules on either side," says Andrew Pincus, who wrote a brief on behalf of the Business Software Alliance and other industry groups.

Monday's dispute arises against a background of fierce competition in the tech world and the specter of "patent trolls," little companies that obtain patents on promising technology in order to gain settlements from big tech firms.

A jury had found eBay liable for infringement of patents held by MercExchange, a Virginia company, related to eBay's feature allowing customers to buy items for a fixed price. The jury awarded damages of $35 million, later reduced by $5.5 million.

The judge denied MercExchange's request for an injunction; the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit reversed. It said once a jury has found infringement, an injunction should be imposed "absent exceptional circumstances."

In an opinion by Justice Clarence Thomas, the high court rejected that view and said a traditional general test for the imposition of injunctions applies to patent disputes. That test requires a showing that money is not enough to compensate for the infringement and that shutting down the technology would not hurt the public.

The court sent the case back for a new hearing, saying it had no position on whether a permanent injunction should be imposed.

Jay Monahan, an eBay deputy general counsel, said in a statement that eBay was "gratified" by the ruling. EBay had argued that innovation would be stifled if an injunction were issued while a company redesigned its technology to avoid patent problems.

Seth Waxman, who represented MercExchange, said he hoped the trial judge reconsidering the case would find that an injunction should be imposed.

Congress Takes Aim at MySpace

There will be no space for MySpace at federally funded schools and libraries if a new bill introduced in the House of Representatives last week passes.

Frequented mostly by teenagers and young adults, social networks such as

MySpace and Facebook essentially are collections of online profiles that include photos, blogs, and other information. Teens use the sites to connect to other teens, voice opinions, and make new friends.

The hugely popular sites, while seemingly innocuous, have come under fire recently from critics claiming that the sites amount to huge databases of victims for child predators.

Called the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA), the new legislation seeks to block access to online social networks at schools. But experts are saying that, as written, there is little chance it will pass.

"Sites like MySpace and Facebook have opened the door to a new online community of social networks between friends, students, and colleagues," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Michael G. Fitzpatrick, (R-Penn.), in a statement. "However, this new technology has become a feeding ground for child predators that use these sites as just another way to do our children harm."

In addition to preventing kids from accessing the sites from school, the legislation would require the Federal Trade Commission to create special Web sites for parents, teachers, and school administrators. These sites would provide information about the potential dangers the Internet presents to children and teens.

No one can fault the government for attempting to protect children from a reprehensible segment of the population, said Mukul Krishna, an analyst at research firm Frost & Sullivan. However, he said, the legislation is too broadly written to enforce. As it is written, he said, a bevy of sites, such as Yahoo and Google, would be restricted in their entirety.

"You cannot fault the thought behind it, but, clearly, a lot of thought did not go into doing anything but making a lot of noise," Krishna said, "because everyone knows that, as it is, the bill cannot be passed."

Lawmakers need to go back to the drawing board and determine how the law will define what sites need to be blocked, Krishna said. Legislators also should consider broadening their definition to include sites that are a distraction for school-age kids as well.

For instance, Krishna said, there really is no reason that gaming and shopping sites, among others, should be accessible from school. "The bill's authors may want to define what makes sense to block and what does not," Krishna said.

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